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Rare lidless tavern pot circa 1699, engraved "John Little att Ye Horse & Jockey in Reading" and with the warning, "If Sold Stole". From the Cyril C. Minchin Collection

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The Lustre of Old Pewter

WHILE the lustre and moonlight glow of old pewter makes a strong appeal to most of us, the blunt truth is that the hobby of pewter collecting is indeed a very curious one.

For early items—the rare Tudor pewter, the early Communion cups, the James I flagons, and items of that kind—seldom go under the hammer for less than some hundreds of guineas; while the fact that old pewter is scarce seems to tempt on to the market late and indefinite pieces of no historic nor artistic interest.

So where does the amateur pewter lover start? First, we must define what we are seeking.

Pewter, which handles so much like lead but often has a silver sheen in its surface, should have no lead at all in its alloy composition; and what silver there may be occurs only by accident, simply because the tin miners of Cornwall (whence much of the ore came centuries ago) did not know how to purify it. Fine old pewter, therefore, should be about 110 parts of tin, and 26 of copper.

Another grade, known to the old pewterers as "tin and temper," happens to be almost pure tin alloyed with a very small proportion of antimony. "Plate" pewter may contain nearly 96 per cent of tin, the rest comprising antimony, copper and bismuth. What is known as Trifle (pewter spoons and other small objects such as table salts were usually made from it) is 17 per cent antimony and only 83 per cent tin. Then there are those more modern alloys, dating really only from the mid-1700s, such as Britannia and (later) Queen's Metal. "Best Britannia" is 150 parts of tin to ten of copper and three of antimony; Queen's is an alloy of rather less tin, but with bismuth added.

So much for "ledde", as old pewter is sometimes described in 17th century accounts and inventories: and so much, too, for stories that such and such a garnish (complete set of a dozen) of pewter plate is rare and valuable because it is "silver pewter."

Of course these indisputable facts about what pewter really is are revealed only to modern metallurgists, with their test tubes filled with nitric acid—to separate out and measure the tin oxide—or peering at the photo slides in their spectroscopes when tiny fragments of test pewter are burned to white heat between electrodes. But tests of this sort are not available to amateurs.

However, there are a few split-second tests which can be tried. With permission of the owner of a specimen in doubt, you could try rubbing the blade of a knife along a very minute part of the underbase. If the alloy is soft and "leady", the knife will show a mark. This may well happen if a genuine old piece has been repaired with low-grade metal such as that from old church organ pipes, which contain often 40 per cent lead. More modern Britannia metal will not show a scratch; it is too hard.

Try rubbing the sharp edge of, say, the handle or finial of a genuine piece of old pewter on a rough paper surface. Even an old newspaper will do. If there is much lead in the composition, I have known a sharp edge write almost like a pencil.

The old pewterers, when doing an assay for the Searching Officer of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, used to melt a tiny pellet in a gun-pellet mould, then cast a similar specimen of pure tin, and compare the weights when cold. A rough test done in the old days (but you certainly could not do this in the saleroom, or on specimens in your collector-friend's display) is to run a hot iron bit from a clear flame right across the base. On pure tin only a faint grey mark will be left, but with low alloys the mark will be a clear brownish red.

No. What matters is not the metallurgy, but the artistry. When two Sheffield silver plate men, Dixon